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INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHML/AMEMBASSY MANILA PRIORITY 3508
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY PRIORITY 0268
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 002696

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/2032
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CH](#) [HK](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: HONG KONG CATHOLIC DIOCESE ON SINO-VATICAN
RELATIONS

REF: A. HONG KONG 01889
[1](#)B. BEIJING 06558

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Classified By: E/P Section Chief Laurent Charbonnet; Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: According to Hong Kong papal representative Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the Holy See had been consulted on and approved the September selection of Father Joseph Li Shan to replace the late Michael Fu Tieshan as Bishop of the Beijing diocese. Because the issue was "sensitive," however, the consultation had been handled directly between the Vatican and Beijing, rather than via the "usual channel" of Hong Kong. Filling Bishop Fu's other vacated position, chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, will await appointment of 3-4 additional bishops and a national conference of mainland clerics sometime after the October Party Congress. Archbishop Fernando Filoni, until recently the papal nuncio in Manila and a close friend of Hong Kong Cardinal Zen, has been appointed to a senior foreign policy position in the Vatican. Nugent believes Beijing is concerned about the prospect of normalization of relations between Vietnam and the Vatican, as the Vatican might cite its arrangement with Hanoi for appointment of bishops as a model for China. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The apparent exclusion of the Hong Kong diocese from consultations between the Vatican and Beijing on the appointment of Bishop Li suggests that the influence of Cardinal Zen, who is highly disliked and distrusted by mainland religious affairs officials, may be on the decline. We believe it likely, however, that the appointment of Zen's friend and colleague Archbishop Filoni to a senior policy position in the Vatican could provide Zen with an indirect but influential channel to the Pope on China policy issues. End Comment.

[1](#)3. (C) Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the papal representative in Hong Kong, recently told us that the September selection of Father Joseph Li Shan to replace Michael Fu Tieshan as Bishop of the Beijing diocese was a "positive development." Li had been ranked fourth on the Holy See's "short list" of candidates and was a "very good priest" with a strong pastoral background and ability to connect with his congregation. His only shortcomings were his relative youth (42), which Nugent said would require him to "manage carefully" his more senior colleagues, and a lack of overseas

training or experience. According to Nugent, there was prior consultation between Beijing and the Holy See on the Li appointment, but because the issue was "so sensitive" the consultation was handled from the Vatican rather than Hong Kong, which Nugent said would have been the "usual" channel. In July Nugent had told us that Li's appointment was likely, as he already had been informally approved by the diocese and was "acceptable" to the Holy See (ref a).

CCPA Chairman Powerless

14. (C) Although the death of Fu in April left both the Beijing bishopric and the chairmanship of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association vacant, Nugent said Bishop Li has not been appointed to the latter position. Selection of the new chairman would be deferred pending appointment of 3-4 additional bishops to fill vacancies due to deaths. Nugent said a national conference of clerics probably would be convened, some time after the October Party Congress. He also observed that the "real power" in the CCPA was held by the party secretary rather than the chairman. Nugent smilingly described a previous bishop who, as chairman, had been unable to place long distance telephone calls from his "impressive" office; to do so he had to walk to the party secretary's office, where his conversations could not be

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private.

Archbishop Filoni

15. (C) Nugent said he planned to attend ceremonies in Manila in October for the arrival of a new papal nuncio. The previous nuncio, Archbishop Fernando Filoni, had been Nugent's predecessor in Hong Kong from 1992-2001. Recently, Filoni had been appointed as "Sostituto" for General Affairs

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of the Secretariat of State, in which capacity he would be one of two deputies to Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. Nugent said this was a very important position, and that Filoni was an expert on China affairs. Nugent previously told us that during Filoni's tenure in Hong Kong, he had been responsible for identifying and vetting all bishops in China and Hong Kong, including Zen. Nugent described Filoni and Zen as close friends (ref a).

Vietnam

16. (C) Asked about the September visit of Vietnamese Cardinal Pham Minh Man to Beijing (ref b), Nugent said the trip had gone well but that Beijing was very concerned about the prospect of normalization of relations between Vietnam and the Vatican. In particular, he said Beijing was worried that the Vatican could cite its arrangement with Hanoi for appointment of bishops as a precedent for China.
Cunningham